



# PRESCRIPTION OPIOID ABUSE IN CALIFORNIA

## **What are prescription opioids and why are they prescribed?**

Opioids are typically prescribed to treat moderate to severe pain. Common prescription opioids include: Hydrocodone (Vicodin ®), Oxycodone (OxyContin ®, Percocet ®), Oxymorphone (Opana ®), Morphine (Kadian ®), Codeine, and the highly-potent Fentanyl (50x to 100x more potent than Morphine).<sup>i</sup>

## **How many prescriptions for opioids are issued?**

Though the total number of opioid prescriptions has been decreasing in recent years, in 2017 there were still nearly 58 opioid prescriptions dispensed for every 100 Americans<sup>ii</sup>.

In California, there were 21,787,042 opioid prescriptions dispensed last year<sup>iii</sup>; that is over 1 prescription for every 2 California residents.

## **How many people go on to abuse prescription opioids?**

Although most people take prescription medications responsibly, opioids are misused and abused more frequently because they are known to make the user feel very relaxed and “high”<sup>i</sup>. Misuse of prescription opioids is particularly dangerous because these drugs can be highly addictive.<sup>i</sup>

In 2014, roughly 1.5 million Californians reported using prescription opioids for non-medical purposes<sup>iv</sup> and in 2015 over 35,000 Californians were enrolled in opioid treatment programs.<sup>v</sup> Nationwide, nearly 2 million people suffer from substance abuse disorders related to prescription opioid pain relievers.<sup>vi,vii</sup>

## **Who is abusing prescription opioids in California?**

Prescription opioid abuse does not discriminate, affecting individuals across different communities and populations. While people ages 25 – 65 tend to be more likely to abuse opioids compared to other age groups,<sup>iii</sup> prescription opioid abuse at younger ages (18 – 23) is a significant predictor of transition to heroin use.<sup>viii</sup>

In California, although men have been historically more likely to die from prescription opioid overdose than women, emergency room admissions for opioid overdose is roughly equivalent across men and women.<sup>iii</sup>

Opioid prescription abuse and deaths have occurred in every county in California, but are more prevalent in Northern California counties.<sup>iii</sup> “If California were divided up into several states ... then parts of our state, principally the north, would be a disaster area as bad as West Virginia,” said Dr. Kelly Pfeifer, an opioid expert at Oakland-based California Health Care Foundation.<sup>ix</sup>

### **What are the outcomes of prescription opioid abuse in California?**

In 2017, non-heroin opioid overdose, including overdose from prescription opioids, resulted in over 4,000 California emergency room visits. Last year, 1335 people died in California from prescription opioid overdose. Over 70% of all opioid deaths in CA involved prescription opioids.<sup>ii</sup>

The number of babies born with drug withdrawal symptoms, including those associated with opioid addiction, have nearly doubled since 2008.<sup>x</sup>

In one year, (2011) there was an estimated \$4 billion in healthcare costs related to prescription opioid abuse in California.<sup>xi</sup> In 2016, MediCal spent an estimated \$24 million for opioid treatment drugs.<sup>xii</sup>

### **What is CA DOJ doing to combat prescription opioid abuse?**

California is one of 45 states [investigating prescription opioid manufacturers](#) and distributors over false advertising and misleading information aimed at patients –large contributors to prescription opioid abuse.

CA Department of Justice has increased efforts to [bring actions against doctors engaging in improper prescribing practices](#), including diverting prescription opioids for illegal uses.<sup>xiii</sup>

CA Department of Justice maintains a [prescription drug database of opioid prescriptions](#) dispensed in California in order to serve the public health, regulatory oversight agencies, and law enforcement.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **What are the effects of the California’s efforts on prescription opioid abuse?**

From 2012 to 2017, there was a 14% reduction in opioid prescriptions, a 74% reduction in people receiving prescriptions from five or more providers, or “doctor shopping”, and a 16% reduction in prescription opioid deaths in California. In the same time period, the number of physicians charged with improper prescribing practices increased by 225%.<sup>ii</sup>

### **What is next in fighting the opioid epidemic in California?**

According to CA AG Xavier Becerra, “The opioid crisis is a serious public health threat that is taking the lives of too many Californians, destroying our communities, ripping apart families, and impacting the work of law enforcement “We cannot sit back as this crisis claims more lives every day. It’s critical that we continue to address this epidemic from all angles.”<sup>xv</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2018, June). *Prescription opioids*. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-opioids>
- <sup>ii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017, August 30). *Prescription Opioid Data | Drug Overdose | CDC Injury Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/prescribing.html>
- <sup>iii</sup> California Department of Public Health. (2018, September). CA Opioid Dashboard, <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/opioiddashboard>
- <sup>iv</sup> Lipari, Van Horn, Hughes, and Williams. (2017, July). *State and Substate Estimates of Nonmedical Use of Prescription Pain Relievers*. Retrieved from [https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report\\_3187/ShortReport-3187.html](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_3187/ShortReport-3187.html)
- <sup>v</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2015). Behavioral health barometer: United States, 2015 (HHS Publication No. SMA-16-Baro-2015). *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville*. Retrieved from [https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/California\\_BHBarometer\\_Volume\\_4.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/California_BHBarometer_Volume_4.pdf)
- <sup>vi</sup> Cummings, B. (2018, September). New California bill requires doctors to prescribe overdose-reversing drug. *KCRA 3*, Retrieved from <https://www.kcra.com/article/new-california-bill-requires-doctors-to-prescribe-overdose-reversing-drug/23091010>
- <sup>vii</sup> Urban Institute. (2018, May). *Estimates of opioid use disorder and treatment needs in California*. Retrieved from [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/estimates\\_of\\_opioid\\_use\\_disorder\\_and\\_treatment\\_needs\\_in\\_california\\_0.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/estimates_of_opioid_use_disorder_and_treatment_needs_in_california_0.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> Carlson, R. G., Nahhas, R. W., Martins, S. S., & Daniulaityte, R. (2016). Predictors of transition to heroin use among initially non-opioid dependent illicit pharmaceutical opioid users: A natural history study. *Drug and alcohol dependence, 160*, 127-134.
- <sup>ix</sup> Karlamangla, S. (2017, October). California's opioid death rate is among the nation's lowest. Experts aren't sure why. *Los Angeles Times*, Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/health/la-me-ln-california-opioids-20171026-htm1story.html>
- <sup>x</sup> Buck, C. (2018, May) Narcotic-affected newborns nearly double in California, but 'it's not the mom you expect'. *Sacramento Bee*. Retrieved from <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/health-and-medicine/article151165882.html>
- <sup>xi</sup> Matrix Global Advisors, LLC. (2015, April). *Health care costs from opioid abuse: A state-by-state analysis*. Retrieved from [https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Matrix\\_OpioidAbuse\\_040415.pdf](https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Matrix_OpioidAbuse_040415.pdf)
- <sup>xii</sup> Ho, Catherine. (2018, March). Medi-Cal spending on opioid addiction treatments skyrockets. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Retrieved from <https://www.sfchronicle.com/business/article/Medi-Cal-sees-sharp-rise-in-spending-on-opioid-12786368.php>
- <sup>xiii</sup> California Department of Justice. (2017, June 16). *Attorney General Xavier Becerra and bipartisan coalition to help address opioid crisis* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-xavier-becerra-and-bipartisan-coalition-help-address-opioid>
- Graphics courtesy of The Noun Project artists Blair Adams, Milinda Courey, Adi Kurniawan, Scott Lewis, Luis Prado, Bob Smith, "Creative Stall", "handdrawy", and "monkik"

For more information, visit:

<https://oag.ca.gov/bmfea/medical>  
<https://oag.ca.gov/cures>

#### Calculation Methods

Rate of opioid prescriptions per Californian was calculated by dividing number of opioid prescription in California from CA Opioid Dashboard by 2017 estimated population of California as of July 1, 2017 according to Census.gov. Rate of opioid prescription abuse in California in 2014 was calculated using reported 2012/2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health Data for people 12 years and older from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration compared against population of California 12 years and older in 2014 according to Census.gov. Percentage of opioid deaths attributable to prescriptions was calculated by dividing total opioid deaths from prescription opioids by total opioid deaths from CA Opioid Dashboard. Change in number of prescriptions written per 1000 residents calculated using age-adjusted, 12-month moving average reported for 2012 and 2017 from CA Opioid Dashboard. Change in deaths from prescription opioids including synthetics per 1000 residents calculated using age-adjusted, crude rate, 12-month moving average for 2012 and 2017 on CA Opioid Dashboard. Change in number of prescriptions from 5+ providers per 1000 residents calculated using age-adjusted, 12-month moving average for 2012 and 2017 from CA Opioid Dashboard. Change in number of physicians prosecuted for inappropriate prescribing was calculated using data from DOJ HQE Statistics Report for years 2012 and 2017.